

# Osborne's Jimmy Porter and the Enigma of Class Consciousness

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Osborne's angry young man is a far more complex character than he is understood to be and he can be licentious, opinionated and cruel. Jimmy does flirting brazenly and tries to justify his activities "Our youth is slipping away. Do you know that?" (Osborne 15) When he is questioned by Cliff or better still asked to explain his anger he merely tries to get away by being even more angry "Oh, nothing, nothing. Damn you, damn both of you, damn them all". (Osborne 15) Jimmy gets nastier with Alison, tries to hurt her, discusses her boy-friend of the past years before marriage but since he does not get any response from her he is disappointed. He wants to invite some reaction from Alison which would give him an opportunity to get at her. Her coolness and balance disappoints him and then he tries to attack her composure in the middle of the uncalled for quarrel, "Don't think I could provoke her. Nothing I could do would provoke her. Not even if I were to drop dead". (Osborne 19) Jimmy Porter's mind wanders and from his wife he turns towards her parents specially Alison's brother whom he describes as a "chinless wonder from Sandhurst". Brother Nigel's intellectual smallness is projected for the sake of malicious intentions and he is accused of making commonplace remarks and never saying anything intelligent. In other words Nigel is supposed to be stupid and unimaginative. Since he is in politics and seems to be a successful politician, Jimmy accuses him and his friends for "plundering and fooling everybody for generations". Poor Nigel is not the only one who is considered a fit and worthy target for pure vitriol but his ancestors too are dragged in because they have been proper successful people. Jimmy can never forget that class-wise he is their social inferior and there was no way in which he could have resolved his problems.

Nigel is supposed to be ill-tuned with the facts of life, a man who lacks all understanding of social problems and the common people for whom he is supposed to be fighting in politics, his voters. Since Nigel is an ex-army personnel, it is considered that he is patriotic but not without loss of vision which results in his having bartered away the interest of his countrymen. Its again the class-consciousness which hurts Jimmy for Nigel went to a public school and all the right kind of training and connection. Jimmy went to one of those government schools meant for the common folk. Alison comes from a good family and could not but have shared the same ancestors. Jimmy and Cliff come from the masses. Cliff describes himself as "common as dirt" and tries to highlight that some of Jimmy's relatives from the maternal side were "posh" and it was their poshness which Jimmy disliked because of his own ordinariness which became much too obvious whenever they met each other which was not often. Class-conflict invariably seems to creep in between Jimmy and Alison and it affects their very personal relationship- that side of a relationship between a man and a woman which in a marriage is supposed to be very pure and loving. Alison finds this unbearable and Jimmy enjoys hurting her wherever it hurts the woman

more, "He never stops telling himself.... that this woman would defile him". (Osborne 29-30) Alison knows that Jimmy was thoroughly disappointed and dissatisfied with her as a woman. He gives everything a twist out of cussedness. In the eyes of proper people Jimmy's licentiousness was immoral and he himself tried to justify it as some kind of new morality and as being a part of freedom within marriage. Alison was a pure woman, a virgin, when she got married to Jimmy but Jimmy instead of respecting her purity tries to make it as something of a disqualification because it involved silently the imposition of the moral values which people who belonged to Alison's class respected and all that proper people respected automatically became unacceptable to Jimmy due to reasons of class-conflict. He enjoys taunting Alison right or wrong, left and right and insolently says that if our parents got to know how their son-in-law and daughter had been living, they would probably call the police. Jimmy's friends were ordinary people and it was their ordinariness which came in between them and Alison, despite the gustiness of their kindness and fondness. It was always the class distinction and barrier which came in somehow as though it was unavoidable and inescapable. The romance between Jimmy and Alison was fast and passionate and irresistible attraction of unlike magnetic poles which could revive itself after the bitterness when they try to play bears and squirrels and escape into an animalistic world of pleasure where class did not matter.

When everything seems to be going fine, a phone call from Helena butts in and Jimmy gets distracted and pushed into a world where Alison was an aberration. Jimmy suspects that Alison was more attached to her mother and other family members and less to him. He discovers letters from her mother in which he is not even mentioned. The conflict between Jimmy Porter and Alison can only be resolved when they become like squirrels and stop exercising their minds because to think meant for Jimmy feeling the pain of being class-wise inferior. The decent and dignified friends and family of Alison become "Dame Alison's" mob-a mob which is hostile towards Jimmy in his imagination. Alison's reticence and reserve is not likely to work and of all people Helena has to tell her that the only option before her to survive in her marriage was fighting and that if she did not fight back she would be killed or destroyed. The bitterness among all of them goes on increasing because all of them possess unshakeable opinions and the problem is that they cannot change their positions because their background casts a shadow even if someone wanted to change his position for the sake of harmony which the others would not allow him and her. It is not that they don't understand each other's position, it is just that they can do nothing about the class to which they belong. To step out of one's class meant invariably getting kicked back into it. Colonel Redfern says that Jimmy speaks a different language as compared with the genteel folk. Even Alison who had married a man from a much lower class is compelled to mention the case of their friend Hugh Tanner whose mother was a char woman and had married an actor. Alison points out that Jimmy was fond of Tanner's mother and Alison finds this relationship amusing because Tanner's mother went to the extent of financing Jimmy's sweet stall. This woman tries to protect Alison but as Alison herself says, "rather heavy handed way". In this sympathy Colonel Redfern discerns something of Jimmy which may have rubbed into Alison. After having had enough of this conversation about conflict in Jimmy and Alison's marriage and its class basis his mind wanders towards India where he commanded the Maharajas army. He recalls the wonderful evenings in India, the hills and the band playing lovely music. And then comes the painful thought that it was all over. For many people who came from good families that benefitted hugely from the Empire, everything had changed once India had become independent. They regretted the passing of an age. "The country seemed like an endless

succession of Sunday afternoons. It was its triviality, its pointlessness which appalled Jimmy Porter, who was in effect an absurd hero rather than a social rebel. His anger was his attempt to stimulate life, his violent language an effort to insist on his existence.”(Christopher Bigsby 21). All this appeared to Jimmy annoying and senseless because neither he nor his father had anyone who had experienced such glories. There was nothing that Jimmy could do about the past and this bred frustration in him which he tried to take out on Alison and displayed it before Cliff.

The frustration caused by lack of a family background combined with his lack of success in material life made him bitter, so bitter that he became blind with rage and tried to make those who found themselves near him suffer. The relief comes only when Jimmy tries to turn his mind away by getting cozy with his wife and as Alison says forget the unbearable pain of living and of being human beings. Alison is always sympathetic towards Jimmy but her rival for his affection, Helena, asks her to fight out his anger and malice against her and her class of people. Helena understands that it was Jimmy's rejection by the upper strata of society which made him suffer, made him poke and prick Alison and enjoy her sufferings. When Helena is firmly lodged in the house with Jimmy and Cliff, Alison returns back because she feels that she loves Jimmy too much. “Passive aggression is a subordinate’s best weapon against his superior. Active attack invites retaliation, when the attack is passive it is usually difficult for a victim to establish blame or to determine whether aggression has occurred.” ( Buss 56) It’s a peaceful and emotional assault.

She is insulted by her husband and jeered. She is told that she had been kicked out of the house through clever planning by Jimmy. She had been insulted by Jimmy and yet she had borne everything only to return back. Her husband tries to present himself as a hero, as a man who had rescued Alison from the evil clutches of her family. Alison believes whatever Jimmy has to say about himself and he imagines that he had made her experience life by carrying her away from her home like a knight on horseback. On the one hand is the unconditional love of Alison and on the other hand Jimmy's abominable dislike and repugnance of Alison’s class moorings. Helena holds Jimmy's attitude in contempt but he was not the sort of man who would ever allow himself to be defeated. It is an intellectual position though perverse it may be and whatever one may say about Jimmy one must remember that he was after all an educated man. His university education could not save him from suffering the pangs of class consciousness in which he found himself always at the receiving end, partially because of his own inadequacies in which Alison always emerged as his superior. Alison does not do anything against him, is on his side, but then all her support could do nothing about Jimmy's unacceptability in proper society. Jimmy was capable of doing better in this mundane world and if he had not been able to do so it was primarily because of his intolerance of the relentless and unforgiving class-consciousness which he came across wherever he went. According to Helena this expression of bitterness was uncalled for and that absolutely nothing provocative had happened for Jimmy to say such repulsive and hatred filled things before them. Jimmy’s loathing causes disgust and abhorrence in both the ladies who wanted to go to church together. The two ladies become annoyed with Jimmy because for no proper reason he was attacking them. Helena feels if life had been tough for Jimmy, it had been so for very many young educated people and Alison punches him back by telling him that he had become so used to his sufferings that they had become a part of his second nature and if he did not live in his sufferings he probably may not know what to do with himself. Jimmy accuses the two of them of being vindictive and informs Alison that after entering his life she probably may not have been to the church at all. Jimmy was never happy with the church because it sooner or



later connived with the establishment in such a way that those who were at the bottom of the social ladder suffered and those who belonged to the higher section of the society benefitted. He calls Alison "a saint in Dior's clothing" and Helena is described as an expert in the "Economics of the Supernatural" and their repulsion in the course of the argument has a dash of violence in it and Jimmy accuses her of being a "pretty bad case of virginity" because she had not seen people die. Jimmy is convinced of being something like the perfect man who had seen the sorrows and tribulations of life which none of these ladies had experienced. When Jimmy enumerates the list of sufferings he underwent when his father was dying, Helena becomes impatient and is convinced that it is time for her to pack up and leave the apartment because there was no hope of Jimmy trying to reform himself or of understanding somebody else's point of view and may be his or her situation. There is confusion and Jimmy would not let the situation go out of his hand because he wants to draw blood and when Alison gets fed up and wants some peace, Jimmy would not want any of it even though he feels "ill". Helena is more aggressive than Alison

Simon Trussler has argued that *Look Back in Anger* is at the same time a play and a myth. In Trussler's opinion it was a play which could be described as kitchen sink drama which dealt with the problems of an unemployed husband and a wife who belonged to a class above her husband. There was marital discord and the problems persist till the very end. It was the title which Osborne chose for the play among the several that he had in his mind that converted the play into the myth which was invented by the media. The angry young men in Britain were born according to Trussler thereafter and soon it became a problem which many writers, journalists and thinkers thought was worth contemplating. The hue and cry about anger soon was found in the socio-cultural environment. The myth of the angry young man became a cultural marker in which "popular distortion" played an important role and the idea gained greater currency. It has also been pointed out that the disillusioned intellectual of the mid 1950s were feeling alienated and the myth of the angry young man was felt as a social need. The biggest role in the myth-making was played by John Russell Taylor who unabashedly said that *Look Back in Anger* had started a revolution with an "explosion". John Russell Taylor used the word "revolution" several times and it became abundantly clear that the myth-making served a much felt emotional need. Some people were uncomfortable with the idea of Jimmy Porter shouting at their faces and Kenneth Tynan took the side of the opposite camp by deriding the oppressive power and domination of those who spoke of "good taste". Tynan also rejected the idea of being emotional as deplorable. When all this was happening Osborne himself spoke about the connection between emotions and protests and he made fun of those snobs who thought that to protect was a vulgar idea. Jimmy's anger was never very focused and it was this lack of focus which was considered to be one of the strengths of *Look Back in Anger*. Emotionalism functions in the play in Jimmy's language which is throughout very charged and none other than Osborne contributed in

describing aggression as “authentic feeling” of an unemployed misfit. Jimmy’s aggression was understood as being a part of a broader class and cultural conflict which invariably ended in conformity and suppression. In Britain many of these young men who were educated on huge government subsidies were trying to highlight their lower- class backgrounds even though they had risen due to their education. Many young people identified themselves with Jimmy and they wanted to feel that they were shaking the people out of complacency which is inbuilt in the genteel middle-class society. The younger section of the audience were happy because the upper middle-class way of life had been attacked. It was during such a time that John Osborne publicly spoke about his idea of doling out “lessons in feeling”. This is how the myth of the angry young man was built up and the audience felt vindicated.

### *Works Cited*

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